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## Self-employment and the chicle trade: the case of the Lebanese minority in the Cayo district of Belize

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**Abstract:** Belize is a relative small country in Central America, which is enclosed by Mexico in the north and by Guatemala in the west and south. The country has a multi-ethnic population consisting of, amongst others, Mestizos, Creoles, Garinagu, Maya's, Mennonites, Chinese and East Indian. One of the ethnic minorities, which has a strong economic position in Belize, is the Lebanese community. When the Lebanese first arrived in Belize in the early 1900s Belize was a prosperous British colony. Lebanese came to Belize because they wanted to improve their economic situation. The word had reached them that Belize was a good and calm country where they could succeed and readily engage in business. The first immigrants came through Mexico which had a large Lebanese community. The focus of this article is on the Lebanese migration to Belize and how the Lebanese used self-employment to become successful entrepreneurs in Belize.

**Keywords:** Belize; Lebanese minority; self-employment; entrepreneurial development.

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**Biographical notes:** Carel Roessingh studied cultural anthropology and received his PhD at the University of Utrecht. His PhD research was on the Belizean Garifuna. One of his research topics is the development of entrepreneurship in Belize, Central America. He works as an Associate Professor at the VU University Amsterdam, Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Organization Sciences. His publications appeared amongst others in journals as *Journal of Enterprising Communities: People and Place in the Global Economy*, *Journal of Tourism and Cultural Change*, *International Journal of Tourism Research*, *International Journal Tourism Policy*, *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism*, *Belizean Studies*, *Tourism, Culture and Communication* and he is co-editor of the book *Entrepreneurs in Tourism in the Caribbean Basin: Case studies from Belize, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica and Suriname*.

Karim Darwish studied culture, organisation and management and received his Master of Science at the VU Universiteit Amsterdam. He conducted research on the entrepreneurial activities of the Lebanese people in the Cayo District in Belize.

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## **1 Ethnic entrepreneurship and self-employment: an introduction**

Belize is a small multiethnic nation located in Central America with 300,000 inhabitants (Belizean Government, 2010). Enterprises, which are managed by individuals or families with an certain ethnic background, are visible present in the streets and on the markets of the different town in this country. Aldrich and Waldinger (1990) believed that an ethnic enterprise is a set of connections and regular patterns of interaction among people who share a common background or migratory experiences.

Aldrich and Waldinger (1990) provided a framework to understand the development of ethnic enterprises by using the concepts of opportunity structures, group characteristics and ethnic strategies.

Their first concept, opportunity structures, focus on the market conditions and situations that support products or services, which are not available on the non-ethnic market, but also deal with the degree of access to business opportunities. Ethnic entrepreneurs gain advantage from the set of special characteristics that arises within a community of like-minded spirits sharing the same religious background, because the ones who share their needs are best equipped for the job.

The second concept, group characteristics, identifies two dimensions: predisposing factors and resource mobilisation. The first is related to the skills and goals that people put into an opportunity, such as selective migration, culture and aspiration levels. Resource mobilisation relies on ethnic social networks, organisation capability and government policies. Family members are often providers of financial as well as labour capital and therefore ethnic groups with larger families might reap more benefits than others.

The third concept, that of ethnic strategies, is a mixture of opportunity structures and group characteristics, concentrating on the adaptation of ethnic groups and their environment. Ethnic entrepreneurs face a number of challenges in establishing and running their business, like acquiring the education and skills needed to run an organisation; recruiting and managing efficient, honest and cheap employees; managing relations; surviving business competition and protecting themselves from political attacks. These strategies are of course also depending on the cultural context in which the ethnic entrepreneur is doing his business (Aldrich and Waldinger, 1990).

Morrison (2000) states that the cultural context in which people develop themselves plays an influencing role in shaping and making entrepreneurs and the entrepreneurial behaviour that they aspire. When talking about an enterprise culture, the concept of self-employment should definitely be included.

According to Filion (2004, p.311) one can describe self-employment as “a person working for himself or herself, and working basically alone, although possibly interacting with others as part of the work”. Filion (2004) has divided self-employment into two types; involuntary and voluntary self-employment. The first group consists of people who were pushed into creating their own means of income by starting to work for themselves.

Typically, this group of people never intended to be self-employed, but due to circumstances were forced to work for themselves. The second type of self-employment, the voluntary one, comprises the ones who always knew that they did not want to work for a boss and would rather work for themselves. The distinction between voluntary and involuntary self-employment can be compared to the two types of self-employment that Dana (1997) identified: orthodox entrepreneurship and reactive self-employment. In his research Dana took a closer look at the fundamental values of entrepreneurial actors to explain the roots of their decision to opt for entrepreneurship. In his literature review he recognised four spheres of influence with respect to the origins of self-employment in ethno-cultural communities. The factors that influence the decision to become an entrepreneur are first of all a focus on the self, secondly a focus on the ethno-cultural milieu, a third focus on the host society, and finally the fourth sphere is a combination of these factors (Dana, 1997). The conditions that Dana used for describing self-employment within an ethnic enterprise can be related to the Lebanese entrepreneurs in Belize.

The first factor centres on the individual, the person as an entrepreneur. In this perspective entrepreneurship is more of a personal quality than it is a profession. Ripsas (1998) summarises some characteristics such as a need for completion, self-confidence/a locus of control, the courage to take risks, personal values and age. The process of becoming an entrepreneur does not only has its foundation in personal skills and intuition, but also in the possibilities one can create in a society and its culture. "The key to initiating the process of entrepreneurship lies within the individual members of society, and the degree to which a spirit of enterprise exists, or can be initiated" [Morrison, (2000, p.59).

In this respect not only the person but also the culture one lives in has a great influence on entrepreneurship (Smits, 2006). This is in line with the second factor that Dana (1997) formulated as a sphere of influence for self-employment; the focus on the ethno-cultural milieu. Culture and background can be the variables that not only give people the drive to become a self-employed entrepreneur; they can also push people towards entrepreneurial activities. Cultural beliefs and values can persuade one into entrepreneurial behaviour. The third factor that can influence one's decision to become an entrepreneur is the focus on the host society. Dana and Dana (2007) are convinced that marginal groups have a sense of separateness from their host society and therefore construct their own adaptive mechanism through entrepreneurship. As a follow-up, entrepreneurship can lead to social recognition, status and respect. With regard to a combination of the three spheres of influence on entrepreneurship Dana (1997) concentrates on the resources that ethnic groups can use in their host society to expand their entrepreneurial activities. As ethnic groups have contacts in other societies, knowledge of their products, a different attitude, access to values and so on; their business will be able to enlarge based on their marginality in the host society.

### *1.1 Methodology*

The data presented in this article are the result of an ethnographic research conducted in Belize from February until July 2009. This research is based on a literature study combined with archival sources and a period of fieldwork. The research was done in the town of San Ignacio, which lies in the Cayo District in the mid-west of Belize and borders onto Guatemala. Traditionally, San Ignacio has been the major city and centre of

trade of the Cayo District. San Ignacio has a relative small Lebanese community with historical roots.

Several qualitative research methods were used to obtain information about the Lebanese community in Belize. These research methods include participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured in-depth interviews with people who can be considered central figures in the entrepreneurial life of this community, people who have a central position in the social-cultural life, and other players in the research field. Ritchie and Lewis (2003, p.3) described qualitative research as “directed at providing an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social world of research participants by learning about their social and material circumstances, their experiences, perspectives and histories”. Furthermore, people possess their own stories or narratives about the past, present, and view of future. “Stories help communities to pass their spiritual, moral and cultural heritage from generation to generation” [Gabriel, (2000), p.88]. In our research, we made space for stories and narratives which our informants passed through.

The research subject was approached as a case study with an intrinsic as well as an instrumental focus (Stake, 2003). This means that the case is used to provide an insight into this particular subject (the Lebanese community in San Ignacio, Belize), as well as to facilitate the understanding of a more general issue (the impact of migration in a multi ethnic society). The purpose of the study is to gain an understanding of the situation within its context, rather than generalisation beyond (Stake, 2003).

In the case of this study, we wanted to give an account of the Lebanese community, bring forward their voices and experiences in Belize with regard to the way they ascribe their social, cultural and economical development in the community of San Ignacio. The aim of the research was to required contacts with Lebanese descendants in order to get an adequate picture of their history, life situation and the stories of their entrepreneurial development in the Cayo District.

The central question is focused on the Lebanese migration to Belize and how the Lebanese used self-employment to become of the successful entrepreneurs in Belize?

## **2 The context: Belize and the Cayo district**

Belize is a relative small country (22.965 km<sup>2</sup>) which is enclosed by Mexico in the north and by Guatemala in the west and south. Although geographically located in Central America the country (especially the coastal area) has a Caribbean vibe and is considered as a part of the Caribbean Basin (Roessingh et al., 2005). Belize is situated in Central America, nevertheless, in contrast to the other countries in the region, the official language of Belize is English, a heritage of British colonial rule. Belize was a British colony from 1862 until 1981 (Shoman, 1987), in June of 1973 the name of the country was changed from British Honduras to Belize. This can be seen as a first consequence of self-government, and a first step towards independence. Although Belize gained self-government in 1973, it was not until the 21st of September 1981 that Belize received its independence. While Belize has been independent for 25 years, it is still part of the British Commonwealth, today merely a ceremonial task – the Queen of Great Britain is officially still the head-of-state for Belize and the Prime Minister of Belize is governing the country on her behalf (Popma and Roessingh, 2010).

The country has a multi-ethnic population consisting of, amongst others, Mestizos, Creoles, Garinagu, Maya's, Mennonites, Taiwanese, Chinese and East Indian

(Sutherland, 1998; Roessingh, 2001). The Maya people are the native inhabitants of Belize. Most of them were farmers then, and they still are today (Bolland, 2003). The Creole population used to be a majority in the country but due to the Central American immigration (and Creole emigration to the USA) these proportions have drastically changed. Currently, the Mestizo population is the majority in this country.

Cayo played a major role in the economic life of Belize and is rich in history, culture and nature. Before presenting the story of the Lebanese, this article will start with a short overview of the Cayo District. The Cayo District is Belize's most western district. It borders on to Guatemala and is the largest of six districts in Belize. Cayo is a favoured tourist destination and known for its natural beauty, green hillsides, a pine ridge forest, its wildlife and two of Belize's important Mayan ruins (Roessingh et al., 2008). According to the 2010 census Cayo District has a population of 72,899 people (Statistical Institute of Belize, 2010). Throughout history migration patterns have changed in their ethnic composition. Today, you can find many other ethnic groups living in Cayo. The district consists of a mix of Mayas, Creoles, Mestizos, Chinese, East Indians, a substantial number of Mennonites, Lebanese and others.

Cayo is reached via the Western Highway which begins outside Belize City and leads all the way to the Guatemalan border. The towns closer to the border are mostly Spanish speaking. One hour ride from Belize City lies Belmopan, the relatively new capital of Belize. Belmopan has an estimated population of 11,100 people and is considered as one of the smaller capitals in the world (Ricketts, 2010). Further, west along the highway the landscape is dominated by the green countryside with small villages and large fields of cultivated farmland. San Ignacio, formerly El Cayo or Cayo town is the major town and traditional the commercial hub of Western Belize. San Ignacio is located 35 km west of Belmopan and together with its twin town Santa Elena makes up Cayo's largest populated area. San Ignacio is a bustling town, home to the ethnic mix of Belize and also a popular tourist destination (Roessingh et al., 2008). There are various types of schools, a hospital, a daily market and a variety of small shops, hotels, restaurants and bars. The Belize River has played a central role in the development of the Cayo District. Up to the late 1940s San Ignacio could only be reached from Belize City by river. The Belize River which connects Belize City with the El Petén region of Guatemala, has led to a growth in population during the 19th century. With trade being built up along the waterway, new permanent settlements arose. San Ignacio and Benque Viejo del Carmen, which is located about 13 km southwest, emerged as main trading posts between Belize city and the Petén region (Buhler, 2004). A variety of goods from the USA were transported from Belize City by river to San Ignacio and Benque Viejo del Carmen and continued their way by mule packs to Petén and other settlements in Guatemala.

The natural resources: mahogany and chicle played a significant role in the development and life of people in the Cayo District. At the end of the 19th century there was a chicle boom in both Belize and the Petén region. Chicle is the milky latex of the sapodilla tree and was exported for the production of chewing gum. Various people from all around Central America were attracted by the opportunities offered by the forest industries. Between the 1900s to around the 1930s San Ignacio and Benque Viejo del Carmen were prosperous centres of the chicle extraction industry. After the decline of the mahogany and the chicle the Cayo district slowly grew into its role as agricultural region of Belize. Today, the district still relies on its natural resources, producing some lumber and also dealing in agriculture ventures such as citrus, bananas, peanuts and cattle and the impact of tourism.

### 3 A journey from Lebanon to ‘the America’s’

For over 400 years, from 1517 to 1920, Lebanon was a part of Ottoman Empire, the area was called Greater Syria. Greater Syria was a province of the Ottoman Empire and included the modern countries of Syria, Israel-Palestine and Lebanon itself. The rules and laws of the Islamic empire were also in function in Lebanon, in which part beside the Muslims, Christians (Catholic and Maronites), Jews and Druze lived. The main causes of the massive emigration of the Lebanese people to other continents of the world were a mix of instabilities (like discrimination and exclusion of certain religious groups) in the declining Ottoman Empire together with a growing awareness of economic opportunities abroad.

Lebanese began arriving in Belize as part of a much larger migration from Lebanon to the America’s (North, Central and South America). Many of these early immigrants travelled to several countries before even having heard about the existence of a place called British Honduras, today’s Belize. So how did the Lebanese end up in these parts of the world and Belize?

There is no simple answer. From the beginning the USA was the preferred destination of many Lebanese. Early migrants were motivated by the stories of wealth and freedom that were to be found there. According to the information of informants, their grandparents and parents initially tried to enter the USA in the late 19th century. In those days the migrants set out to an imaginary place called ‘America’ and did not have extensive knowledge about their destination. The Lebanese first travelled to European ports. In each of these ports a small Lebanese community had come into existence with hotels, restaurants, money changers and travel agents (Hourani and Shehadi, 1992). It was not uncommon that migrants did not end where they wished to go. Many were denied entry to the USA because they lacked the qualifications or because of immigration quotas. Others were the victim of manipulation by untrustworthy shipping agents or ship owners, which was fairly common. Shipping lines brought them in ports of Mexico, the Caribbean or other Latin American countries claiming that they had arrived in the USA. The migrants, without extensive knowledge about their destination disembarked to look around and meet fellow Lebanese in the streets and eventually made new lives. They were soon joined by their family and friends who simply followed their example.

“Back in Lebanon our grandfathers were saving money to make the trip to America. They only could afford third class tickets and geographically they weren’t so smart. The first stop was in Marseilles, France, and from there it was uncertain. It was either the America’s or the Caribbean. It was a long journey and they came without having any money in their pockets. Well, they didn’t speak Spanish and they didn’t speak English. Many found a way to Mexico. My grandfather settled in Campeche, the Yucatan. He started with selling goods from door to door, and from the money he made he was able to open his own store. The word had reached my grandfather and his relatives in Mexico that Belize offered better facilities and that it was a place where they could readily engage in business. So in the early 1900’s my grandfather came down to Belize and settled in Benque Viejo near the border with Guatemala.” (Interview, San Ignacio, April 2009)

If the place where they settled did not have any opportunities, they moved on to another country, and sometimes still another. It is probably in this way that Lebanese started spreading around until some families finally were settled down in Belize.

#### **4 Settlement in the Cayo district, Belize**

The early migrants choose the right time to make their journey to Belize. When the Lebanese first arrived in Belize in the early 1900s the country was a prosperous British colony. The Lebanese came to Belize because they wanted to improve their economic situation. The word had reached them that Belize was a good and calm country where they could succeed and readily engage in business. The first immigrants came through Mexico which had a large Lebanese community. Large clusters of Lebanese families were found in Mexico City and the cities of Merida and Campeche in the Yucatan. Here they had started their new lives and families and also developed commercial and entrepreneurial skills.

The first Lebanese immigrants came to Belize from around 1890. They arrived in small numbers. It is difficult to be accurate about the year and the numbers of Lebanese entering Belize, because the lack of – or absence of – relevant literature and studies on Lebanese in Belize. For this reason, the information presented is mainly based on stories of descendants and the historical findings during the fieldwork in Belize.

According to informants the first Lebanese immigrants travelled long distances by foot or on the back of mules or horses to reach Belize. Groups of Lebanese settled in Belize City, others continued their way up to Cayo, where they first settled in and around the villages of Succotz and Benque Viejo del Carmen. An important pull factor for new immigrants to the Cayo District were the developments made and opportunities caused by the mahogany and chicle industry. Lebanese were not the only ones attracted by those industries. Various people from all around Central America, like for instance Mopan Maya's from Guatemala settled in Cayo in search for labour in the chicle and mahogany camps.

Oral history tells us that one of the first Lebanese to settle in Cayo was Alvaro Habet. He settled around 1891 in Benque Viejo del Carmen leaving family and relatives back in Mexico. The story goes that he came not as someone intending to settle permanent in the new world, he was interested in making money quickly and return in a year or two, to live a better life in Mexico or even to return to Lebanon. However, he found great opportunities in Belize and the Cayo District. He decided to stay and joined the local business community. Not long after the news had reached others, the first immigrants came to Cayo, quickly joined by their relatives and friends. Once in Benque Viejo del Carmen the Lebanese established small stores and other small businesses and dedicated themselves to the mahogany and chicle trade.

#### **5 The first immigrants**

The majority of the Lebanese settling in the Cayo District were young and single males. This situation soon changed, as their family and friends started to arrive and the young men married, choosing their brides from among the local Lebanese family's and the community in Mexico. Some of the early immigrants even returned to Lebanon when they had saved enough money, they married in Lebanon and brought their brides with them to Belize. According to the interviewees, around 15 Lebanese families had settled in Benque Viejo del Carmen by the 1920s. In general they were used to earn their living by farming or were small landowners in Lebanon, although a few had other professions. Most of the first generation immigrants were illiterate. Regardless of their livelihood in



Lebanon, nearly all the Lebanese immigrants became small merchants and self-employed when they first arrived in Mexico or Belize.

In the course of migration many Lebanese changed their names from Lebanese Arabic to Spanish (sounding) names. Some found out the equivalent of their Arabic names and put it in Spanish, others chose totally new names. To give an example of changes in surnames: it is said that the Espats were originally Chebats, the Habets were the Habba's and the Awe's were originally the Chegin's or the Ghawe's. Changes were made most likely because of acceptance, to avoid discrimination, for the purposes of business, and to overcome difficulties in the spelling and pronunciation of their Arabic names.

**Figure 1** The classification of Lebanese by the Belizean authorities

PARTICULARS RELATING TO APPLICANT.

Full Name. ~~Emilio Awe~~ *Amin Abdala Chegin*  
(commonly known as Emilio Awe)

Address. El Cayo, British Honduras.

Trade or occupation. Mahogany and Chicle Contractor

Place and date of birth. Wede in the Department of Monte Lebanon, Syria,  
on the 28th February, 1885.

Nationality. Ottoman, ~~being a member of a race or community~~  
~~known to be opposed to the enemy Governments.~~

Married, single, or widower. Married.

Name of Wife. Sista Zetina.

Name and Nationality of Parents. Abdala Chegin and Maria Yousif,  
Ottomans.

OATH OF ALLEGIANCE.

I, ~~Emilio Awe~~ *Amin Abdala Chegin* (commonly  
known as Emilio Awe)

swear by Almighty God that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to His  
Majesty King George the Fifth, His Heirs and Successors, according to law.

*Emilio Awe*  
(Signature of Alien)

SWORN and subscribed this day of

One thousand nine hundred and before me

(Signature) .....

Source: Belize Archives Department (2009a)

The Lebanese who arrived in the Cayo District were originally Maronites and came from villages throughout the North of present day Lebanon and the region of Mount Lebanon. When the immigrants arrived in Belize in the early 20th century, Lebanon was not yet a sovereign nation. As subjects of the Ottoman Empire the Lebanese had to travel with Ottoman passports. In Belize the authorities and local people mistook them for Ottomans or Turks meaning *Turco's* in Spanish. This classification as Turkish subjects was technically correct however was not based on how the immigrants identified or thought about themselves. The families settling in Cayo did not speak Turkish and certainly did not think of themselves as 'Turks' as they saw in the Ottoman Empire their oppressors (see Figure 1). This was not only confusing to the authorities in Belize, but also to the Lebanese themselves, who were undergoing a sort of 'identity crisis' settling in a new country. Most of the Lebanese immigrants changed their religious principles from the Maronite church, which church is not at all very different from the Catholic, into the Catholic Church, which church was and still is the most dominant church in this area.

According to some the informants, the first immigrants identified themselves more with their village and regional origin – for instance, Mount Lebanon – and their family rather than any nationality. Their primary loyalty was to their village, family and religion and these were the main way the Lebanese connected and identified themselves. They accepted the term 'Syrians' – because of Greater Syria – which was also used. A sense of national identity did not begin to form among the immigrants until the 1920s, when Lebanon became French Mandate and after living some years in Belize. This identity was strengthened after the 1940s, when Lebanon gained its independence. As a consequence, the families slowly began to identify themselves as 'Lebanese' or being of Lebanese descent, to reflect their loyalty and origin from villages throughout the new Republic of Lebanon. Eduardo Awe, a Belizean of Lebanese descent commented:

“Although I was born in Belize and being of Lebanese descent, some still call me *Turco*. If you would ask people about Lebanese or they see for instance the name Awe, Espat or Bedran they would immediately say the Turks. This comes from Lebanon's history with the Ottoman Empire right. So the people tend to mix it up. They refer to anybody from Lebanese descent as Turks and it's difficult to take it out.” (Interview San Ignacio: April 2009)

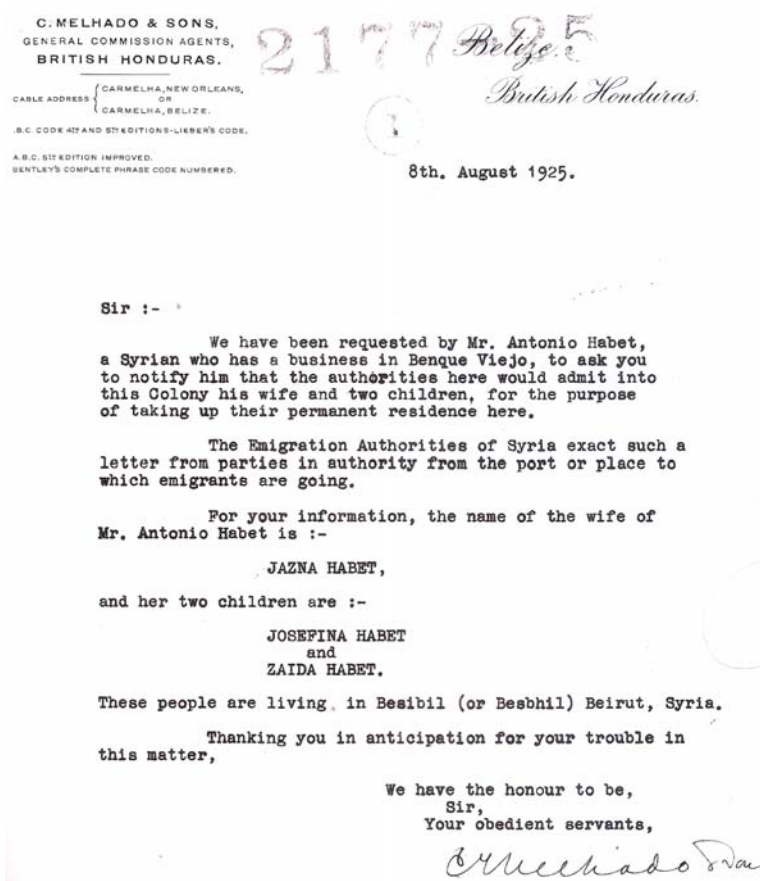
The nickname 'Turco' however stayed with the Lebanese and also remained a cause of misunderstanding until today.

## **6 The Lebanese in San Ignacio**

Since their arrival in the early 20th century the Lebanese have made the towns of San Ignacio and Benque Viejo El Carmen their home and they played an important role in the development of the Cayo District as a whole. Through hard work and an entrepreneurial spirit, they have gained economic well being and better prospects for their children and families. Today one can find second, third, fourth and even fifth generation of Lebanese (descents) in San Ignacio. The Lebanese form just a small part of San Ignacio's population. They include families with surnames as Habet, Espat, Bedran, Awe, Chebat, Hegar, Zeydan and Sabbala, Auill, Hannah, and others.

The dimensions of the Lebanese community in San Ignacio may be best understood by describing the early Lebanese immigrants, their settlement history and economic success.

**Figure 2** Bringing wife and children to Belize



Source: Belize Archives Department (2009b)

Arriving with little or no money at all, many Lebanese engaged in peddling. The stereotype of the newly arrived Lebanese immigrant is that of the merchant peddling dry goods from door to door. Peddlers travelled from place to place, from house to house trying to sell small articles. First, the Lebanese immigrants travelled into remote villages and logging camps selling goods that the people needed but for which they did not have the time and the money to travel to San Ignacio. The merchants used mules or walked, holding suitcases in their hands and carried goods on their backs. They usually sold dry goods like clothing, perfumes and soaps, sewing accessories and also liquor, cigars and tobacco products. Lebanese were attracted to peddling because it was relatively easy to start and on this way they earned money quickly. No extensive language skills, advanced training or large starting capital were required. Furthermore, it allowed Lebanese to interact regularly with locals, and forced them to learn Spanish and English. It was probably also that Lebanese immigrants had to turn to peddling for a living as they had little capital and only a few other jobs were open for them those days. Most of the early immigrants peddled in Mexico, a few also continued with these activities in Belize.

By peddling the Lebanese slowly turned profits, amassed capital and were able to open their own small shops. Once the first Lebanese had established in Benque Viejo del

Carmen, they quickly developed themselves to be the major merchant force. Opportunities were available for hard working merchants which the Lebanese immigrants quickly proved themselves to be.

The majority continued in the same line of business. They owned and operated little family businesses in town. Lebanese controlled the dry good and grocery shops, the bars and also introduced new industries like coffee processing, candy making and other small businesses in the Cayo District. In Benque Viejo del Carmen the Lebanese were active in the following occupations, a liquor dealer (Miguel Hegar), a barber, a cigarette maker, a saloon keeper (Jose Zaiden), grocers and dry good dealers (the Espats and the Habets) and other merchants. In those days Benque served as trading centre between Belize City, with its harbour and necessary supply of goods from England, and the people living in Guatemala. Not long after, San Ignacio took the prominent position of Benque Viejo del Carmen over, because of its more advanced transportation system and strategic location by the Belize River. As a result, many of the Lebanese families transferred to San Ignacio and continued with their activities over there.

## **7 The Lebanese and the chicle trade**

Lebanese played a major role in the chicle trade. The commercial production of chicle played a considerable role in the economy of Belize from about 1900s to the late 1950s. The Cayo District was the centre of the chicle industry with Benque Viejo del Carmen and San Ignacio as important trading towns. Chicle, a forest product, is obtained from bleeding the sapodilla tree for its sap which is then boiled, processed into hard rocks and exported to the manufacturers of the original natural chewing gum. Belizean chicle was mainly bought by the US firm Wrigley's for their chewing gum production. The chicle industry created an opportunity for the Lebanese merchants and is probably also the reason why Lebanese at first were attracted to the Cayo district. Lebanese managed to buy the rights required for the exploitation of chicle and in this way became chicle contractors. The chicle trade was a profitable business for them. While logging mahogany during the dry season, harvesting chicle became a main activity for the rainy season.

The chicle trade was well organised. At the bottom of the pyramidal structure were the *chicleros*, the men who collected the chicle from the sapodilla trees. This work was mostly done by the Maya and Spanish people from Petén, Guatemala. Next came the *encargado* – person in charge –, this was the administrator of the chicle camp with around thirty *chicleros*. The *encargado* functioned as the agent of the chicle contractor and was responsible for managing the food supplies, medicine, clothes, machetes, climbing ropes and other necessary items in the camp. His responsibility was also to see that the *chicleros* produced and worked toward the fulfilment of their contracts. For his work he received extra wages and commission on every hundred pounds chicle delivered. Next came the contractor – majority Lebanese – which usually lived in Benque Viejo del Carmen or San Ignacio. These were the persons who signed the contracts to buy and sell chicle with Wrigley's and other North American companies.

A contractor made sure that supplies arriving from Belize City would be warehoused and distributed to the various *encargado*'s. He was also responsible for paying advances to *chicleros*, for the allowances paid to wives, mothers and other dependents, to ship the chicle to Belize City and to pay the *chicleros* at the end of the season. Sitting on top of the structure was the agent of Wrigley's in Belize City, Mr. Robert Sidney Thurton. It is

said that he was one of Belize's first millionaires. During the chicle boom Mr. Thurton would have as many as 20 or more contractors working for him.

At one point the majority of the chicle contractors were Lebanese. The contractors directed the trade and created employment through the chicle industry. Lebanese were main employers for the people in the Cayo district and became respected people in the community. The chicle trade however, was more in favour of the Lebanese than the chicleros. A resident of Benque Viejo del Carmen whose father was a chiclero expressed to me:

"Lebanese were very business minded. The chicle industry evolved into a sort of feudal system. The contractors would take the chicleros to the forests and the young men would stay there for about 4/5 months. The Chicleros were paid cash in advance. There was a need for equipment and provisions in the camps. The contractors sometimes would sell the food for very high prices and they also had this tendency of taking a lot of liquor or rum with them. At the end of the season, the contractors would subtract from the chicle revenues the cash advance and the value of the used provisions. Eventually the chicleros would find themselves in this perpetual system of debt from which escape was difficult. Chicle was the only industry that time besides logging." (Interview Benque Viejo del Carmen, May 2009)

Among the Lebanese contractors were the following persons: Wahib Habet, Alvaro Habet, Emilio Awe, David Espat Sr., Domingo Espat, Eduardo Espat, Abdo Bedran, Eduardo Sabala, Abdenur Auil and others. Major contractors were the Espat family. The Espats had a concession to bleed chicle not only in Western Belize but also in the department of Petén, Guatemala. Mr. Carlos Espat, son of chicle contractor David Espat Sr. described that as very young man he became involved in the chicle business. There were no roads, no telephone system, no electricity board and no televisions. San Ignacio was a town full of activity. The Lebanese contractors not only engaged in the chicle, they also had the businesses in town: the shops, clubs and the farms. The chicle boom were good days for businesses in San Ignacio. The chicleros, after having been for months in the forest spent most of their money in the shops and of course the many bars. Everything: food, clothing, general merchandise, hardware, medicines, etc., had to be brought up by Cayo boats from Belize City. These boats would return from San Ignacio with passengers, agricultural products and of course, the chicle. The Lebanese had four river boats of fame. Don Eduardo Sabala had a boat by the name 'Elenita', named after his wife. His partner in business, Don Alvaro Habet had two river boats by name 'El Cayo' and the 'Casique'. Emillio Awe owned the 'El Colloso'. According to Espat owning a riverboat those days was 'like owning a transatlantic'.

The Lebanese community was small but played a prominent role and they exerted much (economic) influence in San Ignacio and Benque Viejo del Carmen for many years. Informants noted that Lebanese had a strong sense of community those days. They supported each other and also were very involved with their family. Many families also showed considerable economic and social mobility throughout the years. After the decline of the chicle industry, Lebanese expanded their original business or started new ventures and moved into other industries such as logging, construction, manufacturing, banking and the import export trade. Many Lebanese, especially the younger ones, left San Ignacio and moved to Belize City as this became the centre of commerce of the country. Others left for abroad, to the USA, Mexico, Latin American and the Caribbean for education, business or to join relatives. It was common to have a brother or cousin

living in one country and other family members in another country, making it possible to have commercial links, and also to move relatively easy from one country to another. They however maintained their links with the remaining family members in Belize, the ones who studied abroad often returned to work in Belize.

## **8 The Espat family**

One of the third generation Lebanese recounted the story of her family. Her great grandfather Abdallah Espat and grandmother Nur Elena Nakid came from Daraya, Lebanon. They arrived in Campeche, Mexico around 1885 where they started their family. These people were small merchants, peddled dry goods and were able to open an own grocery store.

David Espat was born in 1887; he was the son of Abdallah and Nur and the grandfather of our informant. At the age of 16 he left Mexico, came to Belize and settled in Benque Viejo del Carmen. In Benque he met his wife Laviva Zeu, who also came from Lebanon. She came straight to Belize with an uncle, during the year 1913. Most marriages then were arranged by the family and it was normal for Lebanese to marry within the community. On arriving in Benque Viejo del Carmen, David set up a 'grocery and dry goods shop' and a bar 'tienda y cantina'. He discovered that there was money to make in the 'chicle business' and wasted no time to become a major player in the industry. He managed to get a big contract for chicle with the Wrigley's Company through the company's agent in Belize Robert Sidney Thurton. The chicle trade was very successful for the Espat family. Later on his mother and father with his two brothers Domingo Espat and Jose Salvador Espat came to Benque to join him. They ended working together in a partnership business, as the distributors Abdallah Espat and Sons Company Limited also known as Abdallah Espat e Hijos. They worked, supported and managed the entire business together in Benque Viejo del Carmen, San Ignacio, and Belize City.

Then in 1931 the great hurricane devastated Belize City. In this particular year the Espat family had made a major expansion into the chicle business including large financial commitments. At the time the hurricane hit Belize all the family merchandise, including the chicle harvest, was stored in Belize City. All the merchandise was lost, causing a major blow to the family. Without any assistance from Wrigley's, even though they were an important supplier for this company, the family started to build-up their business. The youngest of the Espats-Salvador – decided to move and live in Belize City, as this was the centre of commerce for the country. Little by little Salvador started putting business together. When things got a little better he made a trip to New York, where he was able to make contact with the William American Chicle Company. After some negotiation the company made the Espat family their representative in Belize. In this period the Espats moved on with their business. Beside the production of chicle and the transportation to Belize City they also proposed to export chicle to foreign countries. They introduced the product to the Hershey's Company in London. In 1934 the first merchandise was transported to London. At this time the family owned about 300 mules, which were imported from Honduras and Texas. The mules used to transport the chicle from the camps in the forest to the base in Benque and San Ignacio.

The Espats became big businessmen during those days. Throughout the years other relatives joined them and were employed in the family business. There was still a strong

sense of commitment to other Lebanese families in those days. Some Lebanese customs were kept alive, such as the cooking, the religion and their marriages. The family owned several dry goods stores, a garment factory, an ice cream parlour, butane gas distribution centre and other businesses. They also owned several lots and about 1,700 acres of land in the Chial-Negro Man area of the Cayo District. Through the chicle industry the family became wealthy citizens, starting as self-employed small peddling entrepreneurs they became successful businessman.

## 9 Conclusions

The Lebanese pioneer emigrants who settled in San Ignacio were made up of a few young men, but family ties increased their number and helped in making them a significant economic power in the Cayo District. And so in this way the Espats, Awe's, Bedrans are today common names in San Ignacio and whole of Belize. Lebanese have made a significant contribution to the country. Their role in Belize has to great extent been an economic one. When we see the success of these families and present descendants, it is hard to imagine the adventurous journey of the first arrivals.

Regardless of their professions in Lebanon, nearly all immigrants became small merchants and self-employed when they first settled in cities like Merida and Campeche in Mexico and later moved to Belize. Actually, there was not really a choice because few other jobs were open for them those days. Peddling – selling goods from door to door – symbolised a first step in the entrepreneurial path of Lebanese. With peddling the new immigrants amassed the capital needed to open their own small grocery or dry goods shops, which in many cases typically represented the second stage. San Ignacio grew to be an important commercial hub and centre of the chicle trade with Lebanese making clever use of the opportunities available. Through hard work, an entrepreneurial drive and the help of their families, Lebanese became the major merchant force in the Cayo District. The chicle trade and supporting businesses were organised by Lebanese contractors, who established warehouses in San Ignacio, brought trade goods up the river and the chicle back to Belize City. As became clear by conducting research, the success of the Lebanese those days made them to amass great fortunes that still keep the present generations well-off. The information and case studies presented illustrated that many Lebanese families provided examples of considerable economic and social mobility throughout the years. In most cases this was aided by their success in the chicle industry and also because the descendants of the Lebanese have become involved in various trade branches and professions afterwards. Among the new generations there are people engaged in medicine, law, the tourism industry, banking, construction and other professions.

Regardless of their livelihood in Lebanon, nearly all the Lebanese immigrants became small merchants and self-employed when they first arrived in Mexico or Belize. This occupational choice is in line with Dana's basic assumption that the ethno-cultural milieu drives people towards self-employment and further on. Because of a combination in which the intrinsic behaviour rules of the Lebanese extended family and in spite of the fact that they had to build-up their life's in host societies the Lebanese managed became a major player in the underdeveloped world of business in Belize. Dana and Dana (2007) are convinced that marginal groups have a sense of separateness from their host society and therefore construct their own adaptive mechanism through entrepreneurship. As a

follow-up, entrepreneurship can lead to social recognition, status and respect. This premise of Dana and Dana is reflected in the history of the Lebanese community in the Cayo District of Belize.

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